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What the Experts Saw

The pros in politics and policy score the second round.

Immediately after the debate, NEWSWEEK asked experts in politics and international affairs for their reactions. A sampling:

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, national-security adviser under Carter: It was a standoff. Reagan stressed the theme of strength, while Mondale stressed that of leadership. The president was too vague and too simplistic in his discussion of Star Wars. Mondale was too evasive and unconvincing in his attempt to explain how he would verify the freeze, which I fear is a hoax.

HOWARD BAKER Jr., Republican senator from Tennessee: The president did well enough. One terribly important thing was his proposal to link initiatives in arms control to antiballistic-missile defense. That was a bold initiative, and Mondale was on the wrong side of the issue. As for Mondale's freeze proposal, it came out like a political contrivance. You cannot have a freeze on one hand and develop new weapons on the other. After the Louisville debate Mondale gained ground. But on second thought the country got over that. Nothing in this debate disrupted that trend and I expect the president to move ahead now and to win decisively.

JEANE KIRKPATRICK, United Nations ambassador: The president clearly won. Mondale tried to make leadership the issue and the president showed clearly that he is the better leader. On the age issue, the president—with some humor and adroitness—turned it into an issue about age and experience. On the freeze, Mondale virtually abandoned it tonight because by the time he finished qualifying it there wasn't much of the original freeze proposal left. On Star Wars and antimissile weapons, the president seized the initiative and defined the issue not, as Mondale tried to make it, as whether we are going to militarize the heavens, but whether we are going to finally make nuclear weapons obsolete.

GARY HART, Democratic senator from Colorado: Mondale won a clear victory. It continues the momentum in his direction. He won on the level of leadership, on competence—knowing the facts and having some vision of the future. Reagan was not as bad as before, but he was still bad. On the CIA question, he reconfirmed many people's view of his having a meandering attitude and not being too coherent on many of the facts. People have come to expect Reagan not to know what he's talking about; in the next two weeks an awful lot of voters will

become increasingly uneasy with the prospect of a second Reagan term.

RICHARD ALLEN, former national-security adviser under Reagan: I'd call this one the president's way. He gave a very fine account of himself. Mondale made tremendous blunders in keeping the theme on nuclear weapons and in insisting on verification, which for most people is the central issue in dealing with the Russians, and then being unable to explain it. Whether you call it south end, bippy or keister, I think the president kicked a little tonight.

SAM NUNN, Democratic senator from Georgia:



Baker, Kirkpatrick, Hart: Did Mondale win on substance—and the president prevail on style?

I would give a nod to Mondale on substance. And until the closing I would have given Reagan the edge in appearance and style. But he did seem to get lost and start wandering again in his closing statement, and that surprised me. If I had been the president, I would have gone after Mondale on the question of the nuclear freeze. There is not much left of that proposal after you get through emphasizing verification two or three times.

V. LANCE TARRANCE Jr., GOP polltaker from Texas: In the first debate there was so much emphasis on style. This was more substantive, and Reagan won because it came down to who do you trust. He looked good and showed some quickness on his feet. Mondale looked tired with heavy bags under his eyes. If the first debates showed, as many said, that Reagan was getting old, this stopped that idea cold.

ROBERT SQUIER, Democratic media consultant: Mondale outpointed him, but he wasn't as aggressive as he could have been.

He looked tired, a little flat. Reagan made two big mistakes. He reopened the controversy on what he said about recalling submarine missiles. It happened at a press conference, so newspapers will get the transcript and networks will get the tape and everybody will get to see the president say it again. More serious was the instant placing and displacing of the CIA in a Central American country.

DAVID AARON, Mondale foreign-policy adviser: The debate presented a clear choice between a man clearly in command of the facts and a man who continued to have no control over either the facts or, apparently, his own administration. We saw a man who blames other people for what the president is properly responsible for—like the CIA man in Central America who approved the manual and then didn't exist. We saw a commander in chief who didn't accept responsibility for deployment of his troops in Lebanon. That attitude in a president is a disgrace.

WILLIAM COHEN, Republican senator from Maine: The president did a much better job this time. He won because Mondale won't pick up any momentum based on this debate. Mondale tried to reinforce his central theme of leadership—that the president is a nice man but doesn't know what's going on. I think it got to the point of being rude, especially in his closing statement when he talked about a president needing "smarts." That could engender a resentment in those undecided voters.

BILL HAMILTON, Democratic polltaker: The president was kept on the defensive for most of the debate. Reagan wasn't seen as particularly knowledgeable or in command, and Mondale was successful in asking, "Where's the chief?" I wasn't impressed with the president, but he had no big boo-boos. There wasn't a knockout punch. But Mondale did speak directly to weak Democrats—many of whom have supported Reagan—by concentrating on nuclear-arms negotiations, where they disagree with the president.